

Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Enjoying Bosnia and Herzegovina”

CNN has just begun broadcasting a series of short videos inviting viewers all over the world to “Enjoy Bosnia and Herzegovina”. These tourism promotion spots, produced by the Foreign Investment Promotion Agency, bring out much of what is most beautiful and best in this country and will be seen by hundreds of millions of people in the coming months.

I was fortunate to attend the inaugural viewing of these spots and hope that many CNN viewers will be inspired to come to see this Bosnia and Herzegovina for themselves. I also believe that tourism has the potential to help transform this country economically and, dare I say it, psychologically.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the most beautiful countries on earth. It has ski slopes that are varied and challenging, as well as more economical and less crowded than slopes in the Alps. It has wildernesses and wetlands where the variety of fauna and flora is virtually unmatched. It has a historical cultural heritage that offers visitors a unique range of music, art and architecture. And it has a tradition of hospitality that is rich and enduring.

Tens and possibly hundreds of thousands of jobs could be created in the tourism sector and billions of euros earned. However, this will only happen if Bosnia and Herzegovina successfully manages its God-given treasures.

If we look at how countries like Greece, Italy, Spain and Turkey have transformed their economies through tourism, it is possible to identify three pillars of successful tourism development. First, you have to have the basic resources. Bosnia and Herzegovina has these in abundance. Secondly, you have to market your resources effectively. The new advertising campaign is a good beginning – but just a beginning. And thirdly, you have to have a properly developed tourism infrastructure, strategy and culture.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina this third element is lacking. Hoteliers and tour operators know what they need in terms of strategic planning, marketing and infrastructure development, but the authorities have yet to demonstrate that they are willing to respond.

Take for example, the draft tourism law, which would provide for the efficient regulation of the industry, a comprehensive tourism development strategy and an overhaul of the arrangements for collecting tourist tax and spending the revenue. This law has been bogged down at the drafting stage for years because professional, bureaucratic and political interest groups prefer to squabble among themselves than reach a compromise agreement that could allow the tourism sector to take off and start creating wealth for Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Then there are relatively straightforward tasks such as introducing single hotel classification. A visitor who checks in to a three-star hotel in Banja Luka one night and a three-star hotel in Mostar the next might reasonably expect to sleep in the same quality room and receive the same quality service – but they won't, because hotel classification has not yet been standardised, making the process of booking a hotel in this country something of a lottery.

And then there is the issue of a tourist culture. Colleagues who love Bosnia and Herzegovina's scenery are shocked to find litter at beauty spots and appalled that building waste can be

dumped at the side of the road. They also refuse to eat in restaurants where waiters are unkempt, rude or vulgar, no matter how good the food or how picturesque the setting.

Each and every issue I have listed has to be addressed if this country is to evolve into the tourist paradise portrayed in the CNN advertisements. But they can be and tourism can be a key to transforming Bosnia and Herzegovina so that both Bosnians and Herzegovinians and millions of people from around the world will “enjoy Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

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